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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRAGUE 000471

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE, PM/SNA, T/FO, EUR/FO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/22/2018

TAGS: PREL MARR EZ PARM MNUC

SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES NEXT STEPS  
ON SOFA WITH DEPUTY PM VONDRA

REF: STATE 078874

Classified By: A/DCM STUART HATCHER for reasons 1.4 (b)+(d)

¶1. (C) Ambassador Graber met on July 23 with DPM Alexandr Vondra to deliver reftel proposal on concluding the SOFA negotiations. PM Topolanek was unable to participate in the meeting due to an ongoing marathon cabinet session, which will be the government's last before a 3-week summer break. Ambassador Graber began the meeting by stressing our commitment to completing the SOFA as soon as possible, given the expected Czech timeline for ratification and the Czechs' previously stated preference to move the BMDA and SOFA through the parliament as one package. Vondra confirmed the timeline that envisions a late-August submission of the MD agreements to the parliament, and a ratification vote sometime before the end of the year. Ambassador Graber also noted that even if the Czechs decided to split the MD package and move forward with the BMDA ratification without the SOFA, the USG would be unlikely to proceed with construction of the radar base on the basis of the existing NATO SOFA.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Graber walked Vondra through the proposal, including both the Afghanistan deployments incentives and the KC-130Rs offer. Vondra asked several clarifying questions about the cost estimates, U.S. fiscal year, etc. He also asked whether the MOD had been briefed on this proposal, but agreed with the Ambassador that this will have to be a political decision by PM Topolanek and his ministers. Note: We plan to brief both MOD and MFA on the proposal tomorrow. End note. Vondra remained noncommittal throughout the meeting, but he did imply at one point that the positive impact of the USD 32 million on the Czech budget may appeal to Finance Minister Kalousek, who has been identified as the key opponent of the SOFA tax exemption for contractors.

¶3. (C) Both at the beginning and end of the meeting, Ambassador Graber stressed the need to receive the Czech response this week, so that Ambassador McDonald and his team could make travel plans accordingly. Vondra promised to work on getting us a response by Friday. He noted that most ministers, including himself, will be on vacation in the coming weeks, so getting an answer after Friday would be difficult.

¶4. (C) Comment: Vondra is as close as we can get to an honest broker and has been our most frequent and best political contact on MD issues, especially our parliamentary outreach. While Topolanek's ultimate absence from the meeting was disappointing, we have no doubt that Vondra will do everything possible to help us break the impasse. End Comment.

Hatcher